

DEC 8

## Feature: Lynn Stern

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SKULL #28 1991, 16 x 20 inches, gelatin silver print, © 2017 Lynn Stern

By Scarlett Davis

In her sixth monograph, *Skull*, Lynn Stern's labor of love of twenty-five years, quite literally comes to a head with the visual exploration in a series of eight human and animal skulls, intentionally shrouded in cloth, ambiguity, and death. While at first glance, the motive for Stern's endeavors may appear purely aesthetic, an extended accompanying essay by esteemed art critic, Donald Kuspit, puts Stern's fascination with the skulls into a larger dialogue of a traditional, artistic, and historical depiction of skulls, while highlighting the latent subconscious of the artist, which is alive and at play within the body of work.

Lynn Stern is a renowned New York City- based photographer, known for her work in black and white with its use of both direct and indirect natural light. Since the 1980's, Stern's photography has gained attention for its inartificial and honest portrayal and her ability to

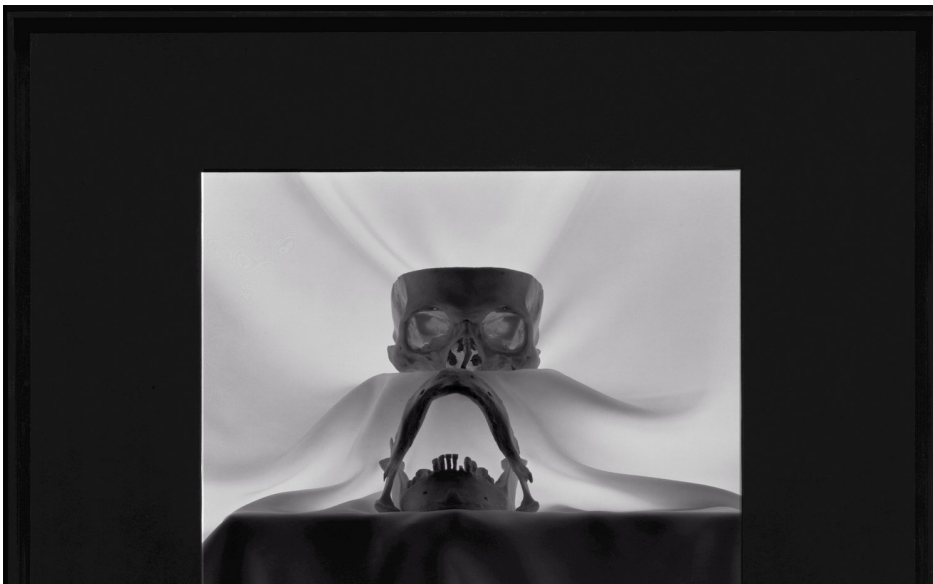
truly uncover the true nature of things. Stern began early on in her career taking photographs of landscapes where she realized that the images in her mind did not always compute with nature. For that reason, she began to “de-literalize” or simply to abstract her photographs, to create something “felt” rather than “depicted,” as she describes. *Skull* then implores the archetype of the shadow used in the last seven centuries of art as a representation of the human shadow, or this complex notion that the human shadow is the personality of which the unconscious is unaware. Stern’s skulls seek not to embody the shadow, but to symbolize---an unprecedented function of the role of the skull in art.

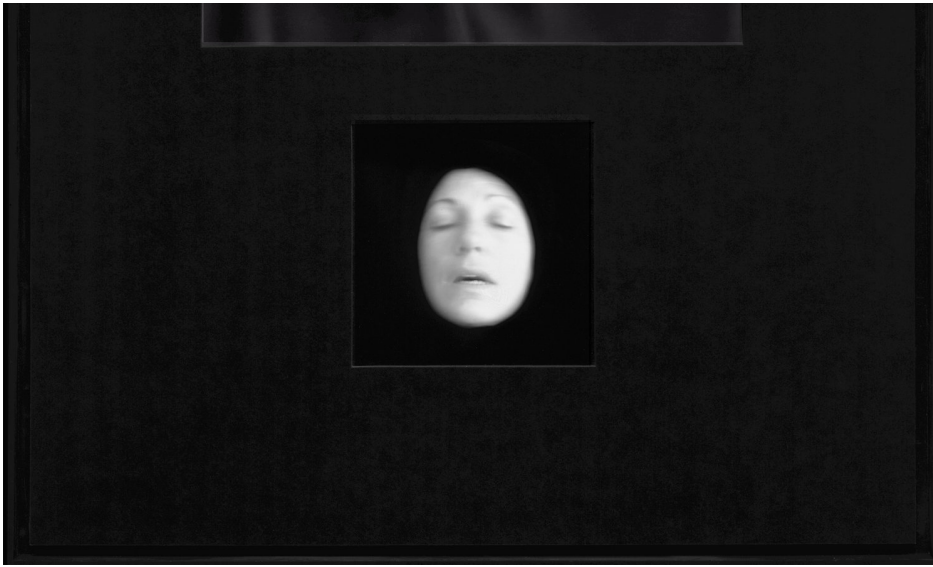
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DOPPELGÄNGER #14-74a, 2014, 20 x 28 inches, pigment print, © 2017 Lynn Stern

Early this December, a panel reading was held at NeueHouse Madison in conjunction with the opening of the exhibition at the Taka Ishii Gallery in New York City on view from November 30th through December 22, 2017. The panel reading hosted the artist Lynn Stern, as well as art critic Donald Kuspit, critic A.D. Coleman, and International Head of Photographs at Christie’s, Darius Himes to discuss the non-literal approach to the work as well as the larger thematic elements surrounding the skulls.

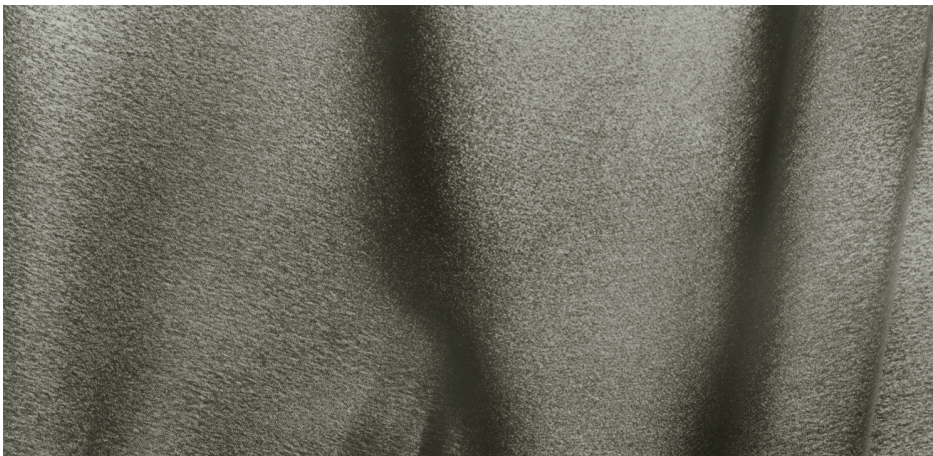


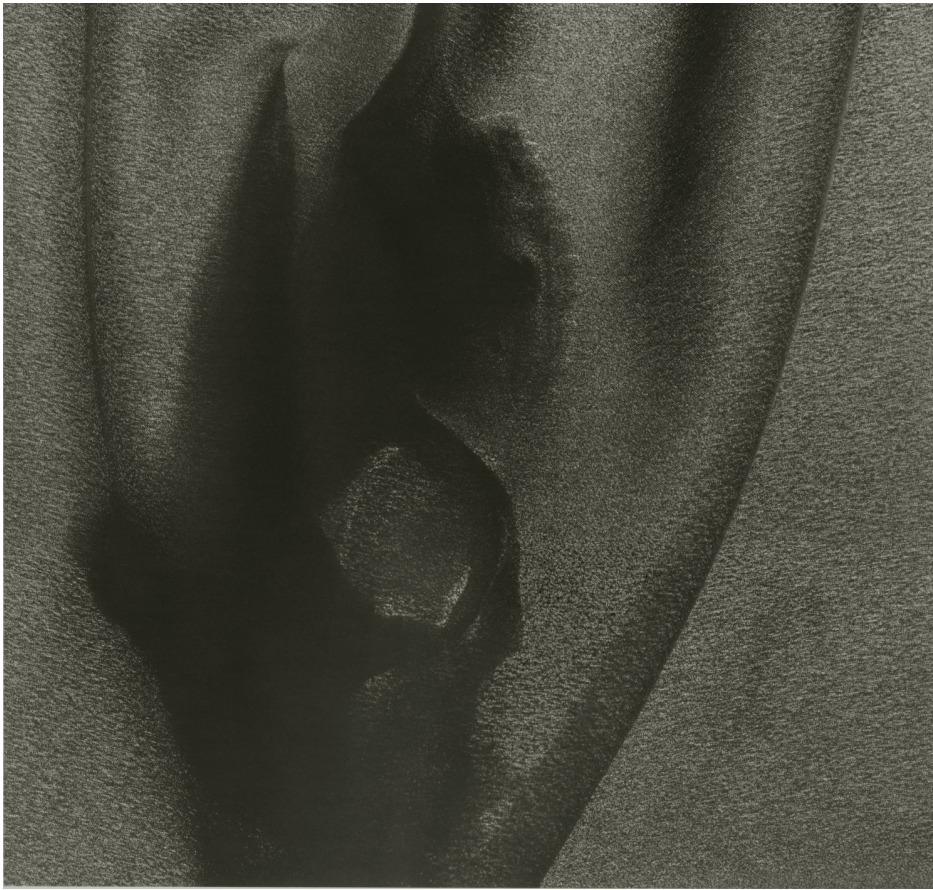


DISPOSSESSION #5, 1990-'92, 47 x 38 inches, framed composite gelatin silver prints, edition of 4, © 2017 Lynn Stern

While not physically present in the room, Freud's thoughts and theories remained a guiding voice through-out the panel discussion. Freud famously postulated: we cannot imagine our own death. Stern's work would suggest otherwise, as the panelist conjecture, the capturing of skulls act as an artistic reflection of Stern's own grappling with the subject of death and her own mortality. The photographer confesses her own shortcomings as she was not cognizant of any deep psychological seedlings that might have dictated her photographs. In fact, for many years, Stern said she was afraid of the inevitability of death and that as she aged, she could no longer live in denial of its presence and of its eminence. Stern's work as a whole is a triumph over death. The skulls by virtue of the photographs are immortal, personified with their own kind of vitality and character. They are untarnished by the effects of Time.

As the critics insinuate, the skull is the apex of the skeleton, an imperishable matter of the body, and thereby; a kind of soul. In the photographs, the skull is seen in light of the soul, as a sacred object. Death is then destroyed by elevating the skull to this form of high art, with the beauty of natural light, and the juxtaposition of blacks and pearl whites. Poet Wallace Stevens wrote, "Death, the mother of beauty." There is a love/hate relationship to the work, as well as to the ascribed idea of beauty in death, and conversely of death in beauty. The line of distinction between the two vanishes, much like a horizon in a setting sun, the same is applied to Stern's photographs, where the shadows often muddy the actual outline of the skulls, which creates a kind of intentional ambiguity between the skull and the observer. Death then becomes a kind of "free floating idea."

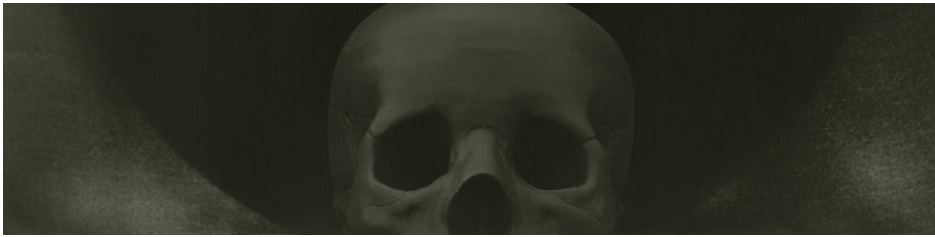




FULL CIRCLE #04-42, 2004-'09, 46 x 32 inches, pigment print, © 2017 Lynn Stern

Stern's images often contain or embody the circular shape as well as the broader meaning circles convey such as "infiniteness" as well as "oneness", both terrifyingly empty. The circles also speak to this tension to occupy space between the material and immaterial within the photo. Unlike some of the classical representations of the skull, like Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Ambassadors*, 1533 the skull is not flattened or vying for the attention among other objects, rather the skulls emit their own individuality, charged with their own energy. The natural light shown through the eye sockets and holes of the skulls not only conveys this theme of circles, but a fixation with concavity.





SPECTATOR #13-45a, 2013-2015, 32 x 36 inches, pigment print, © 2017 Lynn Stern

Stern's interest in the skulls has been colored by the critics as a "fiendish mystery" going as far as to say, "There is something hellish about dealing with the skull-repeatedly, obsessively, compulsively..." Of course, the question with the most weight during the panel discussion was how did Stern acquire the skulls. Rather passé, Stern revealed that she purchased the materials from a catalogue solicited to medical schools. It is also known that she could not bring herself to paint on the human skulls. Memorably, one audience member had asked Stern if she had named any of her three human skulls, to which Stern answered that she had not.

It is surprising to learn that the artist did not develop a kinship with the skulls. Stern captures so much elegance and character with the skulls, they appear almost alive and transient in motion, like the ones featured with their mouths opening. Perhaps, Stern did develop a kinship with the skeletons quiet literally in her closet, but perhaps a bond so sacred, it need not be spoken. Our first breath in this life is as sacred and mysterious as our last; and the experience is entirely unique and autonomous. We are born alone and we will die alone; we all have that in common.

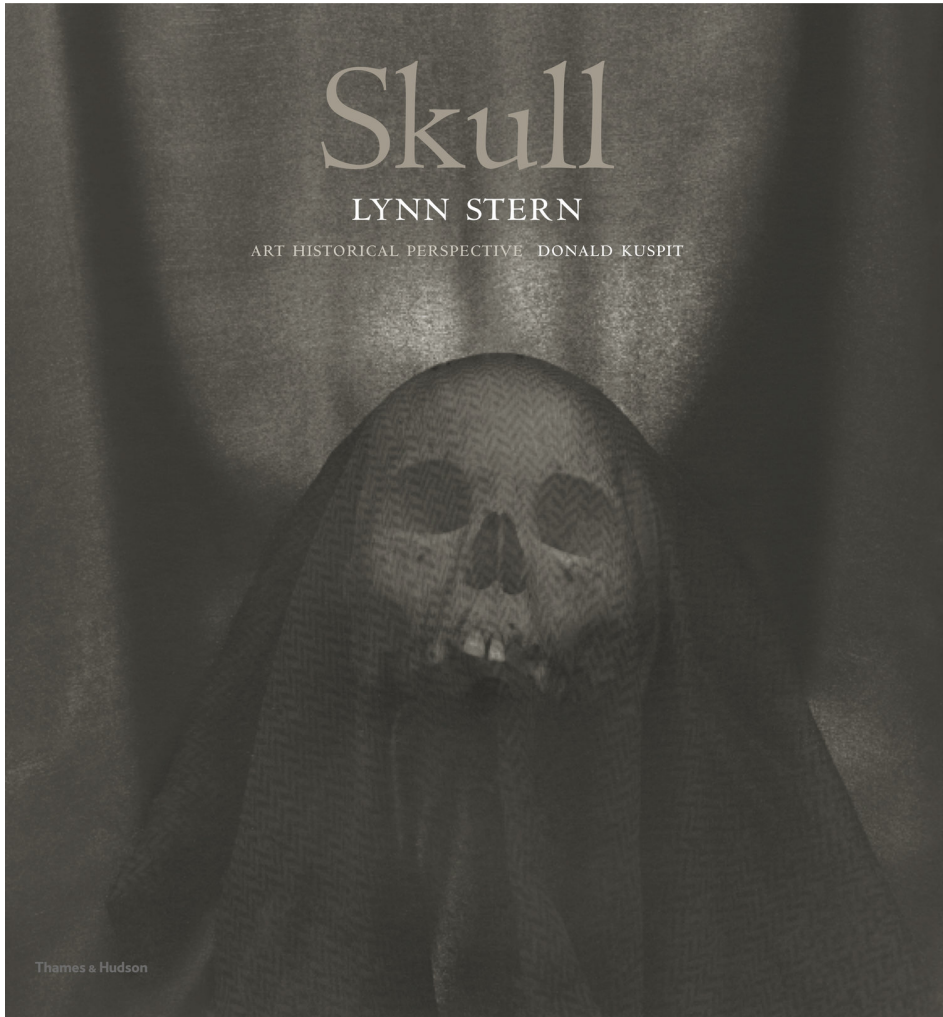


ANIMUS #13a 1995-'98, 16 x 20 inches, © 2017 Lynn Stern

*Skull* has been compiled into a printed book by Meridian Printing, with close to a hundred and fifty tritone and quadratone reproductions of Stern's photographs, as well as more than forty color illustrations from artistic legends such as Picasso, Hans Holbein the Younger, and even Andy Warhol who have been selected to express their opinions of death.

*Skull* is published by Thames & Hudson can be purchased at

<http://thamesandhudsonusa.com/books/skull-hardcover>  
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